Aidan Benson

09/29/2022

# Invisible Man

Invisible man is the tale of a young black man, fortunate enough to gain a college education in a time when college was a privilege hardly afforded people of color. The novel follows the physical and psychological journey from a blind ignorance of his racial and social status to an enlightened awareness of his predicament. This includes the development of his identity, either to the benefit of or in spite of racial restrictions and struggles. Our unnamed narrator tells his story in a series of flashbacks, memories, and dreams instigated by the accidental smoking of marijuana.

While living in the Southern United States, our narrator finds himself restricted to an identity that encompasses being meek and obedient. He has to “play nice” with the white community for the ability to even gain a college education. He vies for their attention and positive feedback by inserting himself into a nighttime brawl as a means of giving his speech to his white overlords. This memory really shows how unaware the narrator is of the reality surrounding him. He accidentally takes the spot of another person, stealing the man’s chance to earn some money, and is completely oblivious as to why the other men are there. He’s even further unaware of how the brawl works, resulting in his participance in a fight he never wanted. This perfectly reflects the overall experience of people of color in the Southern States before and after the Civil Rights Act. Born into a world where they are immediately judged by the color of their skin before they are even aware that they are “black.” This brings to mind a quote from the 2017 television series, American Gods. Taken aboard a slave ship, a group of men are eventually met by the African trickster deity, Anansi. He says to them, “Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, a man got fucked. Now how is that for a story? ‘Cause that’s the story of black people in America! Shit, you all don’t know you’re black yet. You think you just people. Let me be the first to tell

you that you are all black. The moment these Dutch motherfuckers set foot here and decided they white and you get to be black, and that's the nice name they call you, let me paint a picture of what's waiting for you on the shore. You arrive in America, land of opportunity, the land of milk and honey, and guess what? You all get to be slaves." While our narrator does not have the experience of this kind of slavery, his experience of being given a college education due to his meekness and his obedience to the white citizens of his community, highlights the types of people given "opportunity." They are not progressing through society but being equally coerced and forced into a state of stagnation.

Later that evening, the man's grandfather dies, setting the stage for the rest of the novel. Not only does the grandfather refer to the way in which our narrator lives (and the way in which his grandfather lived and taught his children and grandchildren to live) as an act of betrayal to his community, but the man has a horrifying and, at the time, perplexing dream. He's back at the battle royale, holding the same briefcase with the scholarship inside, given to him by the white men at the event. His grandfather is also there and orders him to open the envelope that was meant to hold his scholarship to the black college he attends. Instead, he keeps finding more and more envelopes. It's as if they're never ending. Finally, when he gets to the paper within the last envelope, it states, "Keep this nigger boy running." Unaware of what this means, the narrator spends the next twenty years stumbling through society, in both the North and the South, never questioning why people keep him running. Both black and white people are keeping this man running, exploiting him, and betraying his trust. He isn't disillusioned until his friend, Tod Clifton, is shot by a white police officer. This results in Harlem erupting into violence and our narrator taking on the identity of another, a con man named Rhinehart, who uses his "invisibility" to his own advantage. This results in our narrator doing the same and building his underground hideout. It's only until he writes down his own experiences that he can release his accumulated hatred and begin to love life again.